

Wordplay

T ENGLISH

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Cornelius Eady NEW CHAIR OF EXCELLENCE

When acclaimed poet Joy Harjo left the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 2019 to become US Poet Laureate, the English department was left with a daunting question: how to fill those considerable shoes?

Enter Cornelius Eady, the English department's newest John C. Hodges Chair of Excellence. Eady, who joined the faculty in fall 2021, is author of numerous renowned collections of poetry, including *Latest Dance Craze*, *You Don't Miss Your Water*, *The Autobiography of a Jukebox*, *Brutal Imagination*, and his latest, *Hardheaded Weather: New and Selected Poems*.

Poetry, however, is just one of Eady's areas of expertise. He is also a playwright, a librettist, a songwriter, and an accomplished musician. Music looms large across his work, as do considerations of family and race. A guitarist and vocalist, Eady performs and tours with the groups Rough Magic and the Cornelius Eady Trio. This fall his arrival on campus was celebrated through two concerts by the Trio. In an appearance on WDVX's Blue Plate Special and in concert at the Natalie Haslam Music Center, Eady and his band performed songs from their latest

album, *Don't Get Dead*, a folk-inflected response to the COVID pandemic.

Eady's *Brutal Imagination*, a National Book Award finalist, revisits the notorious case of Susan Smith, a South Carolina woman who in 1994 attempted to hide her guilt in the murder of her two young sons by placing blame on a black male carjacker. The book's first cycle of poems is narrated by the imaginary black perpetrator, who remained the subject of an intense FBI manhunt until the truth was uncovered. Eady's theatrical adaptation of the book, a collaboration with jazz composer Diedre Murray, won a 2002 Oppenheimer Award. The two also worked together on *Running Man*, a musical theater piece that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Eady's individual awards include Fellowships from the NEA, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

As with his artistic work, some of his greatest professional achievements have also come through collaboration. In 1996, Eady and fellow poet Toi Derricotte founded Cave Canem, an organization with the mission to



support and advance the work of underrepresented black poets. Cave Canem began as a yearly weeklong retreat and has since grown to include multiple regional workshops, more than 20 regional and national cultural partnerships, and the sponsorship of two book prizes. Along the way the organization has nurtured the careers of more than 500 poets.

Eady joins Iliana Rocha in growing and expanding our poetry program. Speaking to the *Daily Beacon*, Eady said of the English department, it's "a community, a very, very vibrant, curious, open community and I'm really looking forward to being a citizen of that community."

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MISTY ANDERSON
Professor and Head
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

MESSAGE FROM THE DEPARTMENT HEAD

Supporting Our Students and Each Other

I hope this letter finds you and your loved ones well. Such a sentence might have seemed perfunctory a few years ago, but hard times have reminded us all to be grateful for our health, relationships, and the joys of good books.

Over the last year, faculty members and instructors showed up early and stayed late to give our students a foothold in community, even when many classes had to go online. Their dedication was reflected in student evaluation comments like “my English class was the only class where we really talked to each other. It kept me going.”

Our alumni community helped our students through the pandemic with our English major mentoring pilot, which connects graduating English majors to alumni for short but meaningful phone calls or Zoom sessions about future careers. Our growing list of alumni interviews— including Claire Dodson ('14), entertainment editor for *Teen Vogue*; Camille Renshaw ('90), CEO of B+E Net Lease Real Estate, and, in this issue, Carolyn Thompson ('89), OBGYN and health care consultant—make it clear that English majors can go anywhere.

While professors and graduate students had to find work-arounds when archives closed or travel became impossible, research and publishing continued to flourish. Jessi Grieser won an NSF grant for her work in sociolinguistics. The NEH awarded Amy Elias, Hilary Havens, and Computer Science Professor Amir Sadovnik a grant to develop a digital humanities curriculum that combines computer science and data analysis. Anthony Welch's book on the global epic is forthcoming from Oxford UP. And Iliana Rocha is completing her third book of poetry as her second book, *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, just won the Berkshire prize. That's just a small sample of the work in progress. Students are getting chances to participate in research through collaborative projects like Hilary Havens and Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud's "Austen Aloud" as they learn about both Jane Austen and text encoding.

Understanding the tragic, hilarious, harrowing, and beautiful human experience as it is transmogrified into language continues to drive our research, writing, and teaching. You can read more about our work in this newsletter, which includes our new literature and medicine course; our community engagement with area high schools through the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center, our graduate students, and undergraduate tutors; and the creative work of our new Chair of Excellence, Cornelius Eady. We hope that you'll keep in touch, whether with a virtual visit to one of our online readings, by mentoring a current English major, or just by reading this newsletter. Thank you for being a part of our alumni community. Here's to a happy and healthier 2022.

Misty Anderson

SPOTLIGHT ON OUTREACH

Helping High School Students Develop Their Voices

Outreach to the East Tennessee community has always been central to the UT English department's mission. In fall 2021, the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center embarked on an initiative to assist Austin-East and Fulton High School seniors with the process of brainstorming, drafting, and revising their college admissions applications. The moment for the project was right: the center was already helping UT students through its popular Application Materials Help service and was interested in finding opportunities for community outreach after a successful application essay workshop with students at South Doyle High School. The fall project was launched with generous support from the UT Division of Diversity and Engagement's Office of Community Engagement and Outreach.

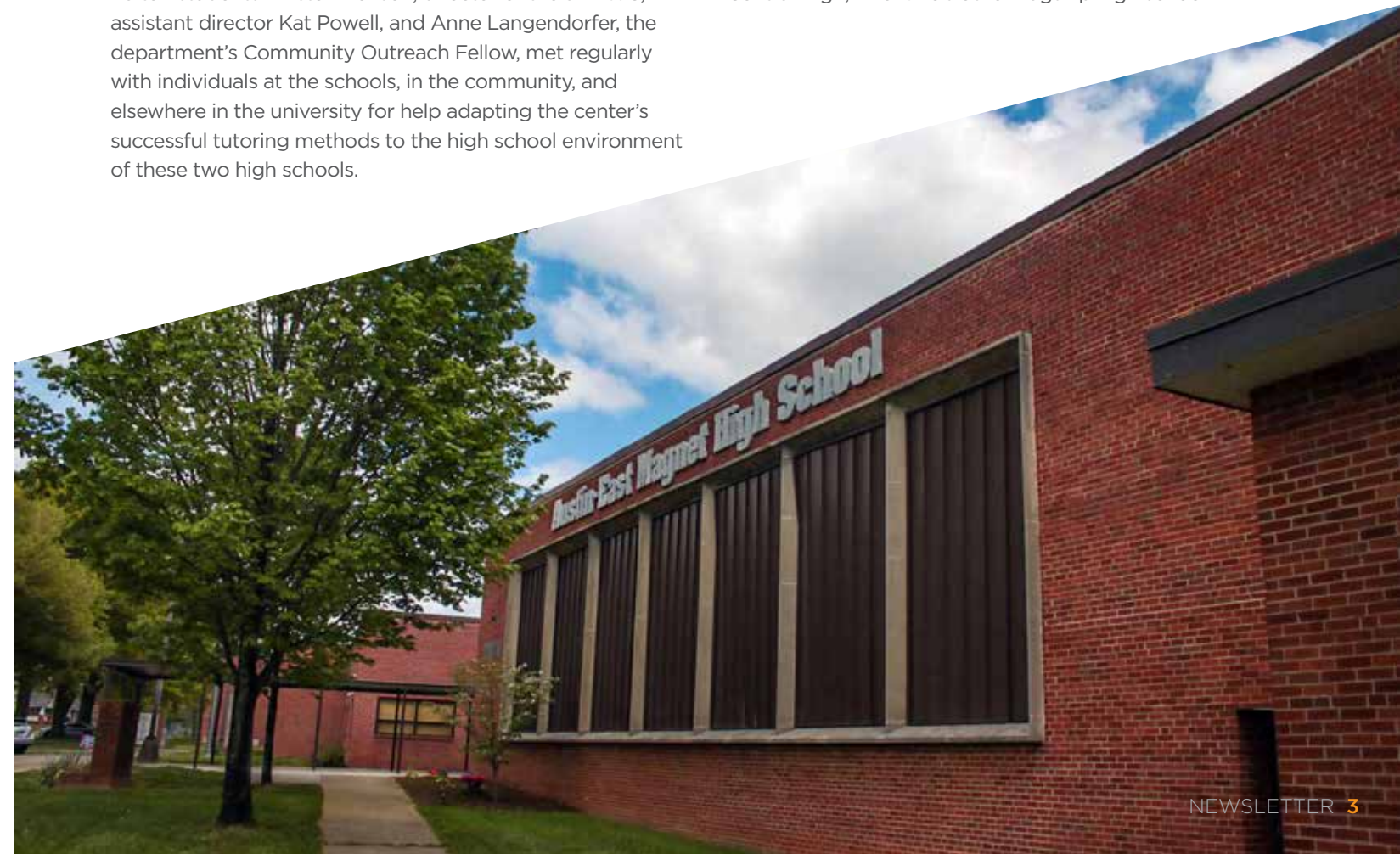
In addition to existing undergraduate and graduate student tutors, four new undergraduates were hired and trained. They learned best practices and principles of tutoring, the genre of the personal statement/application essay, and strategies for communicating successfully with young writers. All tutors engaged in practice sessions to prepare for their upcoming meetings with the Austin-East and Fulton students. Kirsten Benson, director of the JAHWC, assistant director Kat Powell, and Anne Langendorfer, the department's Community Outreach Fellow, met regularly with individuals at the schools, in the community, and elsewhere in the university for help adapting the center's successful tutoring methods to the high school environment of these two high schools.

As flagship high schools, Austin-East and Fulton educate students from under-resourced communities in Knoxville. Tutoring provided these students the opportunity to discover their voices in the application process.

“We are young students, too, who just went through the process just a few years earlier. I was able to give them a space to be open and honest, a place where they can be exactly who they are, and show that through their application essays,” said Savannah Brown, a junior English and sociology major.

Developing their voices in clear, effective prose—and having the opportunity to talk to current UT undergraduate students about their experiences applying to college—brought these students closer to reaching their goals. One of the Austin-East students who participated in the program was awarded a flagship scholarship to attend UT next year.

Given the success of this pilot program, the JAHWC will continue to offer tutoring to students in these two high schools. This spring it also will expand its program to include Central High, Knoxville's other flagship high school.



Carolyn Thompson

A DOOR TO THE WORLD

What can you do with an English major? Whatever you want, says Vol Alumna **Carolyn Thompson** ('88), who graduated with a BA in English, attended medical school, and established a successful practice as an obstetrician-gynecologist.

Her career trajectory is not unusual. Though English and other humanities majors constitute less than 15% of those enrolled in medical schools, these majors earn higher scores on the MCAT exam on average and are more likely than majors in biology or other pre-health fields to be accepted into medical school. Those who combine the fields of English studies and medicine, like Carolyn, find that they complement each other in important ways.

"Literature taught me how to think," Carolyn said. Someone who can understand the inner workings of a piece of literature, she suggests, is prepared to deal with patients and their symptoms. "Patients will tell you what's wrong with them if you just pay attention, and that's what being an English major is."

Literature teaches one how to interact and connect with other people, skills that are essential to diagnosis, treatment, and care. As Carolyn describes it, healing begins at the point where a doctor or other health practitioner says, "I'm present to you, I hear you, I'm listening to you." In short, there's an art and a science to medicine: pre-med courses deal with the scientific dimension of illness, while English addresses the interactive, creative side. Medicine, after all, is highly creative. In surgery, for instance, "everything you do changes something, and you have to be prepared to deal with that change in circumstance." No wonder medical schools want students with the nuanced, supple intelligence that English studies cultivates.

One of Carolyn's fondest memories from her time at UT was participating in the off-campus Drama in Stratford and London program with Professor Rob Stillman the year after graduating. This program, which she describes as "life-changing," gave her a love for travel that she would later pursue with surgical mission work in Guatemala and Malawi.



In recent years she has transitioned from fulltime medical practice to working as a chief medical officer for a healthcare tech start-up company and establishing a consultancy practice for entrepreneurial companies developing medicine-related products. Whether through writing and editing documents or reading a novel a week for enjoyment at home, English remains an important part of her life and work. As an active member of the Friends of English Advisory Committee, Carolyn is excited by the department's initiative to expand undergraduate internship opportunities for students, like her, who are excited to bring English major skills to non-English careers. After all, as she herself demonstrates, an English major is "a door to the world."

When you support the UT English department, you help us provide a high-quality educational experience for our students that prepares them for a wide variety of career options.

Please consider making a one-time or sustained contribution today.

Learn more at
english.utk.edu

Thank you for your support!

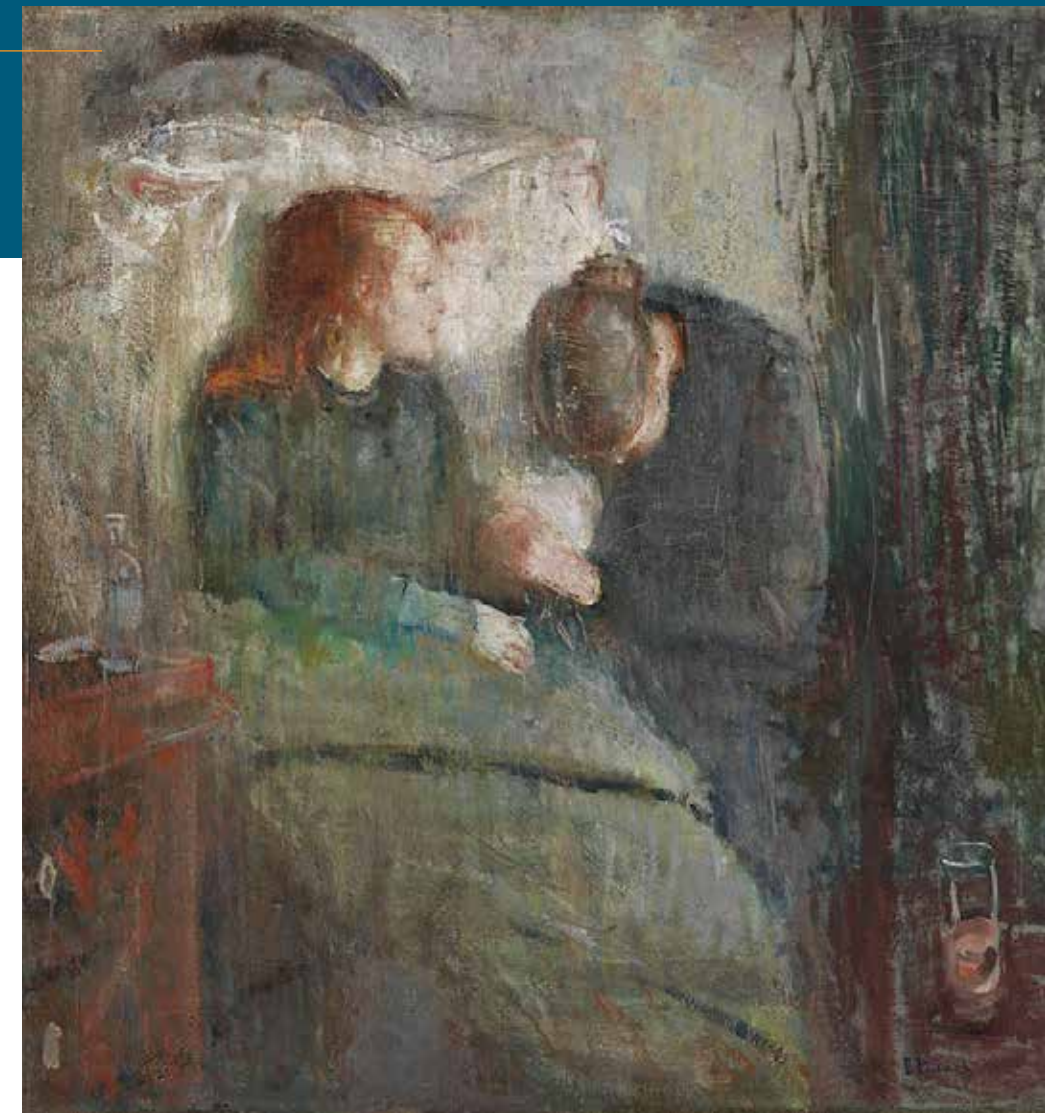
Literature and Medicine

In the midst of last year's ongoing pandemic, the English department premiered one of its newest curricular offerings: a 300-level undergraduate course in literature and medicine. Developed and taught by Professor Stan Garner, the course explored literary representations of illness, medical care, and biotechnology through the study of fiction, nonfiction, drama, poetry, film, and graphic arts.

Coming together in the weekly Zoom meetings were pre-health students and students with other plans who were interested in the human body and the stories we tell about it. They read written accounts of illness and disability—from Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* through Virginia Woolf's "On Being Ill" and Thomas DeBaggio's memoir on life with Alzheimer's—and they looked at the relationship between narrative and the art of medical diagnosis. Other units focused on medicine and race, women's health, and the ethics of medical science.

In addition to exploring what it means to be sick, they also asked how illness, health, medical diagnosis, and treatment are shaped by external factors. How, they asked, do our understandings of the individual and its place in the world change when we pay attention to the body's biological vulnerabilities and the cultural and political fields that shape medical knowledge and practice?

Literature and Medicine introduced students to the medical humanities, a thriving interdisciplinary area that explores the connections between



disciplines such as English, history, and philosophy and the health care professions. As medical schools and medical practitioners have found, the study of literature is particularly important to this conversation. Novels, memoirs, and patient narratives provide access to the lived experience of illness, and they remind those who treat illness that patients are more than the subjects of medical science.

In the words of Ayesha Ahmed, an English major and biology minor, "Through literature, health professionals can read more about the perspectives of the ill and gain more empathy from reading and comprehending their stories."

For their final assignment, the students wrote autobiographical fictional or nonfictional documents sharing their experience during the most serious global pandemic in 100 years. Ayesha, who wrote about her own experience contracting COVID-19 during the course, described thinking about Katherine Anne Porter's powerful novella about the 1918 Influenza Pandemic: "As I lay struggling to breathe, I often thought of Miranda from *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and sympathized with her as my fever worsened." Writing an account of her illness was a powerful experience. "I felt as though my documentation of my battle with COVID-19 could be studied by scholars 100 years later when the next plague emerges."



GRADUATE STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

A Place to Write

Fiction-writer Jeffrey Amos's path to the UT English department, where he is pursuing a PhD with creative dissertation, was a circuitous one. After graduating with a BA in English from the University of Texas and working in the theatre in Austin and Chicago, he moved to Los Angeles to become a television writer. Among the programs he worked on as a full-time researcher and story producer was the PBS documentary series *Genealogy Roadshow*, which explored the genealogical histories of individuals living in cities and regions around the United States. Combing through extensive archival material, he determined the most compelling ways to tell their stories.

"It was a real ground-up experience in historical storytelling," he said. "To have researched three to six wildly different stories in one city created for me a new understanding of the history of a place, and it was a powerful lesson in the ways that the past, quoting Faulkner, is not even past."

Jeff's work as a fiction writer allows him to expand his focus on human beings' relationship with history and the environment. His creative dissertation is a historical/family novel set in the late-1950s on a ranch in rural Colorado. Its story traces the fragile relationships between members of a family and their community following the loss of the youngest member of the family, a nineteen-year-old man who disappears from a mountain roadside in the middle of a snowstorm. This novel also extends into the past, tracking earlier generations of this family and their history in the mountain parks of Colorado.

"I'm experimenting with methods of showing how ecosystems shape and constrain character, story, and plot. Not just how humans change and shape their environment, but how the nonhuman imprints on and shapes us."

As part of his extensive research for this project, Jeff has consulted land records and newspapers from rural Colorado, geography monographs, and studies of the cattle industry in Colorado's parks and of predator control in the western US.

After earning his MFA at Purdue University, Jeff was attracted to the UT Creative Writing Program by its outstanding faculty, its strong sense of community, and its openness to interdisciplinary engagement.

"The past year, I've had a fantastic opportunity to work at the Humanities Center as a research assistant, and there I've been in contact with so many people from all over the university doing incredible work across a number of fields."

He was also attracted, he admits, by the university's location and its proximity to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and other national forests. After all, Jeff believes, what one writes is inevitably influenced by where one writes.

UNDERGRADUATE SPOTLIGHT

A "Practical" Degree



It was a chance meeting in her technical and professional writing class that set Sarah Rainey on her path. She was a sophomore, concentrating in technical communications, and the student who sat next to her was a senior.

"I just thought she was so cool," Sarah said "She had a lot going on. She was very professional, and I was like 'I'm going to do that one day. I'm going to be like her.'"

To say Sarah has a lot going on is putting it mildly. Now in her senior year, Sarah has paired her English major with a second major in language and world business, as well as a minor in business administration. She's become nearly fluent in Spanish. On the side she serves as editor-in-chief of *The Daily Beacon*, having worked all the way up from copy editor.

Sarah Rainey always knew she wanted to be an English major. "I was that person in high school, that everyone was like, if you need anything English-related, ask Sarah."

Still, her first semester at UT didn't go smoothly. After receiving her first low grade in an English class, Sarah found herself rethinking her choice of major. A discussion with one of her professors the following semester turned things around. He convinced Sarah she had what it took, that English would carry her to a real-world career in business.

"Practical" is a word Sarah uses a lot in talking about her English major.



"I've learned editing, which is valuable for any workplace, but I've also learned communications skills, analysis skills . . . I've learned how to think deeply."

Another skill Sarah has developed is leadership. At UT's *Daily Beacon*, Sarah initially found the atmosphere very intimidating. She even contemplated quitting. Though she stuck with it, she held onto that early experience. When she took over the leadership reins in spring 2021, she set about transforming the newsroom into a place where everyone could feel comfortable.

"I love seeing people step up and have more confidence in themselves and they can take those leadership roles when they might not have necessarily seen themselves doing those things before."

While she doesn't know what the future holds, Sarah has already had a chance to put her English skills to use through an internship at Mclaurin Aerospace. They were looking for someone with both business and communications skills, and Sarah was a perfect fit.

For Sarah, things have come full circle. She still thinks a lot about that student she met as a sophomore. "I just thought that girl was so cool. She was doing so many things," Sarah said. "And now that's me."

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Sarah Bernstein, Gabriel Reed, and Rickisha Rodgers in October, headlining UT's student-run reading series, Chiasmus.



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